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Israel's Arms Operation

The United States has interests in the Middle East that are so vital to the security of the nation that presidents since at least Harry Truman have made clear they'll go to any lengths—including war—to protect the U.S. position there.

And U.S. strategists realize there's only one military force powerful enough to block Soviet designs on the Middle East. That's the Israeli army. This is a major reason (along with domestic political considerations) why American presidents have tended to bite their tongues when Israel pursues courses that are not exactly to the White House's liking.

The ease with which the Israeli tail has wagged the U.S. dog over the years is made clear in highly classified documents that have been shown to my associate, Dale Van Atta.

They reveal the serene self-confidence that successive Israeli governments have displayed in their dealings with the United States over arms supplies.

For example, one set of top-secret documents reveals that for several years after the Yom Kippur war of October 1973, the United States had no idea of the extent of Israeli arms purchases. Finally, a high-level group was put together to dig out this information. The task force pulled together "the many threads of Israeli operations in the arms transfer area, and the total picture indicates just how well-organized their system is—and how little we have understood, let alone controlled, what has happened in the past," according to a top-secret document.

The Israelis' plea has been that they need U.S. weapons to offset the Arabs' overwhelming military advantage. This has been successful even though U.S. military analysts have ridiculed the claim.

For example, before the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1978, the U.S. experts said Arab capabilities had "fallen" and Israeli capabilities were "up." Their

analysis concluded, correctly: "There is no question that the Israelis would win." The same assessment was made in the month before the Israelis' invasion of Lebanon last June, rendering ludicrous Defense Minister Ariel Sharon's complaint to Washington just before the attack that Israel needed more arms to defend itself against the Arabs.

Past minutes of a secret meeting of the National Security Council show that U.S. officials have not been fooled by the Israelis' poor-mouthing. Those present "generally agreed that there is no military rationale for the Israeli arms requests, and that they should be considered primarily in the political context."

One top-secret State Department report shows how commonplace the Israelis' pleas for speedy delivery had become. Commenting on a cable from Tel Aviv, the report said Israel had complained "that delivery of weapons has been slowed, either through bureaucratic bungling or by deliberate policy—and asks which, along with the usual demand for quicker response."

The high cost of expedited delivery never seemed to bother the Israeli government. For example, according to one approved arms list, accelerated delivery of hundreds of Sidewinder air-to-air missiles doubled the price to more than \$100,000 apiece.

The Israeli influence may have peaked, though. Even before the latest Lebanon invasion, a high-level Pentagon official wrote in a report that Israel's clout in Congress was "slipping badly." He speculated that this was due "to a weary state of mind over the Israeli lobby [and] an enhanced understanding of the necessity for an evenhanded policy in the Mideast."

The official added: "I am optimistic that we may have turned the corner in our special relationship with Israel. United States interests may be first for a change."

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